

Field Building

*Field Building enables
social innovation and
systems change*

What is it?

Connecting fragmented players in a given area of work (weaving networks) to create an organized industry around an issue or challenge.

So that...

The field can operate more effectively & efficiently, tease out best practices, improve outcomes.

Why should we care?

Fields and networks are what hold systems together. Thus, fields and networks are the key to changing systems.

The intended outcome of field building:

- Brings attention and legitimacy for a certain issue
- Increases the exchange of theory & practice between domains (in order to tease out best practices and reduce inefficiencies), and
- Develops incentives for collaboration that may not have happened organically

How can you tell if you have Safety in the 'Container'?

Safety and trust are a key ingredient to a healthy network. They enable sharing that, in turn, enables 'good' practice to emerge and further the field. How do we know when trust and a feeling of safety has been created within a network?

Here are some positive signs to look for:

- Network members challenge one another and ask questions in a constructive, non-threatening manner
- Network members openly disagree with funders and can request that funders not be present at certain meetings
 - Network members speak openly about experiences, successes, learnings and insights
- Network members are eager to experiment with new practices and request support of other members, sponsors, organizers, etc.

Healthy Networks

are at the core of robust fields

They require:

Clear & Unified Purpose

Balancing the scope of the guiding star so that it is broad enough to be relatable to range of stakeholders but also narrow enough to be meaningful. A clear social contract outlining what can be expected from the network and from members.

Empowered Participants

Reciprocity is an underlying thread. While some formalized roles may exist, leadership is widely distributed. Established code of conduct that encourages connection, engagement, trust, and taking initiative

Flow & Agility

The dynamic nature of networks require agility and reflection about what is working, what is not and what is needed. Established systems for feedback loops enable this continuous learning

Access to Resources

Ability to discover and access needed resources among members (skills, space, assets, relationships, etc.) through an established habits and systems of sharing and offering.

Safety & Trust

All members are stewards of connection, leadership, bridging differences and inspiring others. Members are seen as equal partners and peers resulting in flattened hierarchies and a deep sense of respect, trust and safety



"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete"

Richard Buckminster Fuller
Architect and Futurist

How do networks address power imbalances & hierarchies?

Power imbalances and hierarchies undermine deep collaboration and connection by valuing some voices over others. Networks address power imbalances and hierarchies in three ways:

- By valuing participation: Peer relationships that acknowledge each individual and the unique value they bring
- By distributing leadership: encourage all network members to connect with one another and take initiative
- By extreme inclusion: focus on including all stakeholders, particularly those at the extremes

Questions to ask as you build a field

- What value do members receive? What do they give? Is the exchange clear?
- Is there ample trust and reciprocity? Are some groups more heavily engaged than others? Who is not participating but ought to be?
- How big does the network need to be?
- How is responsibility shared across the network?
- What infrastructure is needed to maintain and strengthen connections?
- How open or closed should the spaces for network connection be?
- How quickly does information about network assets flow through the network?
- What is the network's ideal form one year from now? Three years? Five years?
- How does the network know if it's working or not, and how does it make needed adjustments?
- How does the network listen to its participants?

What resources do emerging networks need?

Growing network and fields must be able to access what they need when they need it. Below are the most common types of assets and resources required by networks and fields:

- Time
- Facilitation
- Meeting space
- Transportation
- Food & refreshments
- Research & Documentation
- Technology

Additional resources

1. Improving Care at the End of Life: How the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Its Grantees Built the Field. By Patricia Patrizi, Elizabeth Thompson, Abby Spector (March 2011)
2. Building to Last: Field Building As Philanthropic Strategy. By Lucy Bernholz, Stephanie Linden Seale, Tony Wang (2009)
3. The Strong Field Framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large-Scale Impact. The Bridgespan Group
4. Building Fields for Policy Change. By Lucy Bernholz and Tony Wang (2010)
5. Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide. Monitor Institute & Grantmakers For Effective Organizations
6. Learn And Let Learn: Supporting Learning Communities For Innovation and Impact. Research Center For Leadership In Action & Grantmakers For Effective Organizations
7. Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits. By Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor
8. Now & Next: Future of Engagement - Collaborative Social Innovation. By MSL Group
9. Social Innovation for Communities. By Up Social

This resource was developed by SiG National

SiG is a collaborative initiative seeking to address Canada's social and ecological challenges by creating a culture of continuous social innovation.

At SiG we define a social innovation to be an initiative, product or process that profoundly changes beliefs, basic routines, resource and authority flows of any social system in the direction of greater resilience. Successful social innovations have durability, impact and scale.

The collaboration is comprised of: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, MaRS Discovery District, SiG West and the University of Waterloo's Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience.

For more information visit www.sigeration.ca or contact info@sigeration.ca

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